

February 2003

## I, User -- The Unbearable Lightness of Service: Notes on the Customer Experience

Rick Lugg  
*R2 Consulting*

Follow this and additional works at: <https://docs.lib.purdue.edu/atg>



Part of the [Library and Information Science Commons](#)

---

### Recommended Citation

Lugg, Rick (2003) "I, User -- The Unbearable Lightness of Service: Notes on the Customer Experience," *Against the Grain*: Vol. 15: Iss. 1, Article 34.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7771/2380-176X.4268>

This document has been made available through Purdue e-Pubs, a service of the Purdue University Libraries. Please contact [epubs@purdue.edu](mailto:epubs@purdue.edu) for additional information.

bly-like fashion, with some attendees later complaining that waiters had taken plates

away before they had finished eating.


The next day, the Egyptian press briefly reported that **Mrs. Mubarak** had visited the **Bibliotheca** to check on its status. "The First Lady didn't mention her meeting with the friends. I was shocked," complained one Egyptian-American friend who attended the luncheon.<sup>13</sup>

At the friends' general annual meeting on April 25, **David Wardrop**, a United Kingdom friends group member, gently advised the **Bibliotheca** administration to make the library more than just a repository for **Alexandria's** history. Please, **Wardrop** added, give the friends more notice if still another date for the inaugural had to be canceled.

**Serageldin** told the gathering that the library would be opened to the public in mid May and that Egyptian government was planning yet an-

other official inaugural for next October. No one knows for sure if that will happen.

But when it does, the challenges for the **Bibliotheca Alexandrina** and its friends will have just begun. In the years ahead financing is expected to be the big challenge.

"A developing country like Egypt really can't sustain a project of this magnitude by itself," **Harris** said. "To sustain its operation and maintenance, we hope the international community will continue to provide donations, assistance and expertise."<sup>14</sup> 

*Contributing Editor **Ron Chepesiuk** has recently returned as Professor and Head of Special Collections, **Winthrop University** in Rock Hill, SC. He is also the author of 18 books and more than 2600 articles. He has been writing about the **Bibliotheca Alexandrina** since 1994.*



*Richard Holmquist and Laila Dowidar.*

## endnotes

1. Interview with **Samia Harris**, April, 2002.
2. Ibid.
3. Information about the situation in **Alexandria** was gleaned from interviews, observations and a reading of the local English-language press.
4. Interview with **Rosalie Amer**, April, 2002.
5. Ibid.
6. Ibid.
7. Interview with **Dr. Hassan M.E. Azzazy** in 2002.
8. Ibid.
9. Ibid.
10. Interview with **Mohsen Zahran**, in 2000.
11. Interview with **Amer**, April 2002.
12. Interview with **Azzazy**, 2000.
13. Interview with source in **Alexandria** who wished to remain anonymous.
14. Interview with **Harris**, April 2002.

## I, User — The Unbearable Lightness of Service: Notes on the Customer Experience

by **Rick Lugg** and **Ruth Fischer** (R2 Consulting)

Here at **R2 World Headquarters**, the progress never stops. Since August, we have switched from dial-up to **DSL** Internet access. We installed a wireless **LAN** in our home and office. We turned techno-naturalists, "stalking the migrated email" as the mega-ISP that bought our mini-ISP turned loose our messages without even a GPS device to guide them. ("Sir, sometimes a few get lost along the way."). We attempted, as self-employed citizens, to purchase disability insurance from a company subsequently featured in a "60 Minutes" segment, and still more dauntingly, to comprehend how to file claims on our non-standard health insurance policy. ("The best I can tell you, sir, is don't!")

To cross any of these innocuous-sounding tasks off our to-do list (and prevent them from reappearing there two weeks later) has required the resourcefulness and vigilance of a New Englander in winter...and the soul of a clerk. Although **R2** is blessed with these traits in abundance (especially the soul of a clerk one), our

business plan did not foresee that we would require them *just to be someone's customer!* Perhaps the *worst unintended consequence* of a consuming, technology-driven, customizable-to-your-DNA economy is that *no one understands how the whole thing works!* ("Sir, we only handle billing here. You need to talk to Tech Support...or maybe Customer Care.")

This refrain is so familiar that there are Muzak versions playing while we experience higher-than-average call volumes, but nonetheless **R2's** DSL/LAN/Email record bears further listening, because if you play the third cut backwards, it says "this is a problem in our industry, too." Either that or "**Walt Crawford** wears white suits" — it's hard to be sure. (Wasn't he barefoot on the cover of *American Libraries*?) At any rate, the complexity of the customer experience continues to grow, as does the complexity of the customer service response. It doesn't look like it's stopping anytime soon, and as yet no company seems to have much of a handle on

it. So let's hit the play button again.

Whether you're a librarian or just an ordinary person, when you're ready to buy, everyone is friendly, including the buyer. For **R2**, the promise of infinite bandwidth gleamed brightly, offering still faster access to the **Anderson-Hamaker Listserv Debates**, with **Goodman** and **Watkinson** up in the booth, and **Commissioner Okerson** wondering whom to suspend; mpegs of last year's **ALA Discussion Groups** or the all-important day three of an ILS vendor presentation; live streaming of colloquies on consortial collection development, meetings of standards bodies, and committee organizing sessions; bit-mapped facsimiles of famous consultants' reports—total, real-time professional development! We'll hardly have time to work.

The ISP's sales department answered all our questions, and our calls! They even called us back. Once our order was processed, installers came to run the wires and jacks. Now, with a

*continued on page 87*



tiny DSL box on the wall, I, User, have morphed, steroid-like, into I, Broadband User! Life is good. Commerce is good. We are at least a beta site for satisfaction, though the production release is still weeks away.

Entertaining as it may be to someone not directly involved, we'll skip over the next stage, involving the many trials and many more errors of installing a LAN and configuring four computers (representing multiple operating systems and living on three separate floors) to see the DSL router and one another. Suffice it to say that "XP is smarter than you are, so shut up and stop whining" — at least I think that's what the error message said. Three days, four return trips to Best Buy, and 600 trips up and down stairs later, R2's spirits reached Abbreviated Nirvana: DSL, ISP, LAN, not to mention WAN from all the effort.

Two days later, though, capital letters were flying like ACQFlash meeting announcements before ALA. Our ISP (known as MCT) went through an A&M (or was it an LBO?) and became TDS. "NFW!" I wailed.

And on the sixth day began the great migration, with promises of limited down-time, plentiful grazing, redundant servers and the briefest of service interruptions timed to occur during our REM sleep. When the dream ended, phone calls and recriminations began: "Do you have a dial-up account with us?" "Try this Webmail server." "Do we host your domain?" "The account is set up under your son's name — is that right?" "I don't know why that didn't happen." "It says here in the record..." "That sounds like a tech support issue." "Let me send you another test message." "Did that one work?"

And, on the other line, R2's customers, friends and acquaintances: "Didn't you get my email?" "Gee, you usually respond when I send you a message;" "Listen, you SOB, you wanna be DOA?" etc. In short, a business-threatening, ulcer-enhancing *problem that needed to be solved*.

To be fair, people did try. **Customer Care** cared, at least in that far-off, wow, that's a bummer, sort of way. There were dozens of phone calls. We got our own Incident Number. People followed up. They instructed us to try the "legacy pop server," where we found a few ancient messages, a few duplicates, and enough debt-reducing, performance-enhancing spam to choke an inbox. After two weeks in "to serve you better" limbo, our current email was restored.

But in the end, no one could find the missed and missing messages. (That console jockey Case from *Neuromancer* might spy R2's correspondence in the **Arthur Anderson** data cores—they do need the work.) Despite persistent pressure, along with customer service and tech support people who wanted to help, and tried to help, our email problem was never diagnosed or solved. Someone somewhere inside that mega-ISP knows what happened or didn't happen. For whatever reason, that knowledge could not be retrieved and used. This little anecdote, we imagine, repeats it-

self every hour of every day, in a pattern of muddle and frustration.

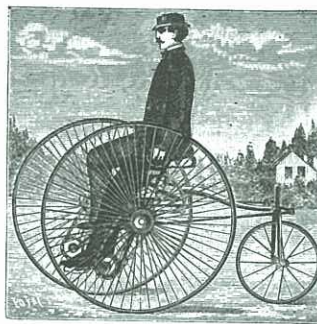
So how does all this relate to the library world, you may well be asking by now? And what is it about this pattern that is so disturbing? Here are a few bald(ing), middle-aged observations on the subject:

### The Environment

1. The information industry and profession grow more complex daily.
2. Although business is spread among fewer companies (big publishers, big vendors, big deals), products, versions, interfaces and add-ons proliferate. Content changes constantly. Mergers, acquisitions, and corporate demises are frequent, and lead to changes in procedures, policies, and terms, not to mention actual mistakes.
3. Vendors supply cataloging, order records, physical processing, Web systems and interfaces in addition to books and journals, e-journals and eBooks. Vendors have multiple contacts at the library; the library multiple contacts at the vendor.
4. ILS vendors supply not only OPACs and ILL modules, but linking systems, meta-search tools, digital content, metadata, and e-journal management modules.
5. Entire companies (cf. **Serials Solutions**) have sprung up to keep track of what other companies do.
6. The same content can, in some cases, be obtained from a publisher, an aggregator, a consortium. Licensing, hosting, and IP authentication may be handled at multiple levels. A single user or institution may have access to the material in multiple ways.
7. Virtually every interface can be customized to the individual user.
8. All combinations of systems and processes may need to interact at some point. ("How do I load my Serials Solutions record into my LinkFinderPlus knowledge base?")
9. Libraries must support bibliographic instruction across diverse and sometimes overlapping systems, content, and formats.

### The Problems

1. No one can know everything. (Except consultants.)
2. Customer service is often an entry-level position, and turnover is high. Training of customer service staff is time-consuming and expensive.
3. It's often no one's job to see the whole picture and coordinate an appropriate response. Referrals abound, due more to lack of information than lack of interest. ("I don't have access to that part of the system.")



4. It's no one's fault when the product or service doesn't work, so there's seldom anyone appropriate to unleash a tirade upon. By the same token, no single contact ever seems to be responsible for resolution of the problem.

5. New products lead to new and unanticipated problems. Both the library customer and the content or service provider need to develop expertise, which takes time, and leads to muddling through as an interim solution. (Not that there's anything wrong with that...)
6. When a patron, a user, a customer, or a business partner has a question or problem with the service provided, how can they know where to start? How can they ask the right question? Does good customer service require helping the customer express their problem in a way that can be diagnosed?

7. Increasingly, any service or product involves more than one company or provider. Who is responsible for creating and assuring the good customer experience? Who serves as the advocate, or the overseer?

8. There's always information — too much information in the customer relationship is as detrimental as too little. How to identify what's important?

9. It's not a question of intentions — for the most part, customer service people want to help. They don't have enough information, they can't see the whole picture, or it's so complex that they can't understand or explain it.

### What's Needed?

1. A systems approach to customer service; that is, a way to see the whole picture. An overview of the customer's accounts and services. A way to coordinate all the necessary expertise. A "synoptic" view of the customer's activity.
2. A first contact that functions like an ombudsman — more highly-skilled and trained than typical first-level customer service. The best parallel may be the reference interview, where careful questioning of the "customer" occurs before resources are recommended. After this assessment, the Customer Ombudsman (Ombudsperson? OmBud?) can direct the caller to appropriate resources.
3. Vendors, content providers, libraries, and publishers need to design a customer service environment that's not just a call center or a CRM system. They need to understand the customer's world of configurations and options, explain it to them, then diagnose and solve the problem.
4. It's a two-way street. A library customer can help by providing an overview of its own big picture, and how all the processes, systems, and content fit together. When a vendor comes to call, that big picture

*continued on page 92*



## International Dateline from page 91

The other important item on the calendar is the so-called "Amsterdam" meeting of STM in the late spring. In 2003 it is back in Amsterdam.

In London in December the **International STM Association** hold two seminars (information-sharing) at the end of the Online week. The first of the seminars, on the Thursday, is mainly for those involved in the internal processes of the publishing houses and is entitled *Strategies of Journal Production in the Electronic Environment*. Librarians will be pleased to learn that publishers really are trying to get digital versions of journals articles online, in correct form and before the print version is available. It is a very difficult task, however.


The seminar on the Friday is the *Innovations Seminar*. This year there were over 90 present, mainly publishers, and the theme was web services—the third wave of online publishing. What is this third wave? The definition provided is that "publishers begin to develop innovative web services that add significant value to their content" and goes on to predict that "with the advent of the third wave, the journal itself may begin to be transformed from the model that has

## I, User from page 87

can help make sense of separate conversations with Collection Development, Acquisitions, Serials, Cataloging, Database Maintenance, Systems, Preservation, and consortial partners.

5. The challenge for vendors/libraries is to learn how to shoot the curl of the information wave rather than be pounded into the ocean floor. (The challenge for writers is to avoid sentences like that one, but it's 1:10 AM, and the deadline was at midnight.) Both customers and those who serve customers (and we are all both!) must work at the coordination, communication, and information sharing.
6. Consultants!


As the customer experience becomes more complex and frustrating, there is some risk for all providers of goods and services, including libraries. If patrons or customers receive unhelpful or partial responses or have to extract needed information piece by piece, they'll eventually give up, and will stop using that vendor or library. They'll switch to a competitor (**Google!**), or stop looking, or revert to the time-honored expedient of watching TV all the time. (Assuming, of course, that customer service can get their digital cable working.) You don't want that on your conscience now, do you?

But there is more good news here than bad. Now that technology, customization, and strategic partnerships have become the very air we breathe, competition can and will shift back toward service, toward helping customers and patrons get what they need from our products and services. The winners will be not only customers, but those organizations that can understand and simplify the customer experience. 

served the scientific community for hundreds of years." In library circles, a prediction like this would refer to so-called "alternative publishing," the cluster of ideas and initiatives based around SPARC. What does it mean for STM publishers?

The keynote speaker was **Patricia Seybold**, the eponymous leader of the group of that name. Her line is making it easy for customers to do business with you. Her thesis is developed at <http://www.pspgroup.com>. What publishers offer should encourage rather than deter publishers—not rocket science but, as I am sure librarians will feel, something that needs to be said and at length. The other presentations, from publishers, developed the theme and personalization of products and services and forging closer relationships with the author community. For those interested in delving into such matters, the presentations themselves may be obtainable through <http://www.stm-assoc.org/infosharing/presentations.php>. Among the interesting offerings were, as usual, innovations from the **Institute of Physics Publishing**, who provide an annual update on what they are doing at **Charleston**. They propose customer focused services for authors and referees, recommendation services like **Amazon** and the creation of a smoother interface to encourage users to mine the content on offer. The speaker from **IOPP** pointed out that some of their innovations had not worked. He instanced, as not wanted by the community, special interfaces and dedicated "filing cabinets." The **Elsevier** presentation concentrated on their investigation into

what journal authors want and how they can satisfy these wants. Central to developments is the quest to provide authors with a 360 degree view of the publishing process so that the author can find out where his or her paper is in the process with ease and 24x7. "Traditional" publishing works because authors (not to mention editors and referees) go to traditional publishers: a lot of work is going on sorting out those practices that exasperate authors—and editors. It is clear that **HighWire Press** is, at last, beginning to view itself as more than just a facilitator if a little less than a publisher. As many readers will already know there is a lot of work going on in Stanford to provide offerings on behalf of all or most of the publisher clients. One perception interesting to me that came from the presentation by **Richard Newman** is that users need to have lots of options, but be given simple routes. Like Swiss Army knives, all tools should be available but not all open at the same time.

This is a quick selection of innovations. The discussion brought up, mainly tangentially, some concerns and some fundamental queries. Are we talking about content or services? What will happen to the journal itself in the "article economy?" Can publishers really handle the supplementary material in digital form, which is now beginning to stream in and which takes up a lot of space and handling? An old stager from the floor pointed out that librarians do not have money to pay for all the potential services on offer. I imagine that many readers will concur. 

## Devil's Advocate — COUNTER, XML, and Online Serials Measurement

by **Robert Molyneux** (Director, Statistics and Surveys,  
U.S. National Commission on Libraries and Information Science;  
Phone: 202-606-9181) <[bmolyneux@nclis.gov](mailto:bmolyneux@nclis.gov)>

The purpose of this article is to elaborate on the major points of my talk at the last **Charleston Conference** and to discuss recent developments.

### BACKGROUND

There was much discussion at the Conference about the measurement of the uses of online journals and databases. All agreed on the importance of this question and the inadequacy of the current reporting of data on the use of these expensive materials. **Ann Okerson** ably summarized these problems so I defer to her discussion of the many issues involved.

Given that there is a demand for the collection and distribution of "good" data on the use of online materials, the question now is: how to do it?

I have concluded that the true cost of that unpleasantness in the Garden of Eden was bad data. Before Adam and Eve messed things up, data were good and readily available. Now, we have to work to get good data—by the sweat of our brows. It is hard and expensive work.

### THREE STORIES

Probably the prevalent view in the field is that good data come from sufficiently clear definitions. Let me share with you three cautionary tales from work I did with the **Association of Research Libraries (ARL)** in the 80s.

#### 1. Expenditures for automation

At the time, the large academic libraries that were members of **ARL** were committing increasing resources to expenditures for automation. It was important to find out how much was being spent but there was no category in the **ARL** data to collect this number. **ARL** had not collected data on automation expenditures because it was a new and rapidly developing area. Like the matter of the use of online journals and databases, it was an expensive and fast-growing target.

Two committees of **ARL** each independently decided to find out the answer to the question of how much was being spent by the **ARL** li-

*continued on page 93*